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# Live from the Nebulizer: Annie Lanzillotto and Eviction Survival

### **Hillary Miller**

ABSTRACT Hillary Miller takes up theories of the city, illness, and precarity via a variety of performances by New Yorker Annie Lanzillotto. Miller argues that as she struggles with survival and eviction in the city, Lanzillotto reveals the bodily and economic limits of the precarious artist while protesting the inequities of the neoliberal city. Through this unique and eloquent study, Miller exposes how neoliberalism acutely and chronically structures the contemporary city's spaces, socialities, and bodies, and explores performance's potential and complicity in the face of those structures.



- "You have to understand the basics to survive a whole life."
- -Annie Lanzillotto 1
- "No it is not simple, this business of poverty."
- -Dorothy Day<sup>2</sup>

On April 13, 2012, Annie Lanzillotto uploaded a video of herself to YouTube, entitled <u>"Live from the Nebulizer."</u> She filmed the five-minute direct address rant while suffering from an acute bout of contagious double pneumonia. In the video, she waits for a visiting nurse in her mother's apartment in Yonkers. The rhythmic, wheezing nebulizer creates an eerie score. The image is framed within a tight circle, as if filmed through the apartment's peephole. A surgical mask obscures her face, and a newsboy cap is pulled low over her eyes. Her fifty year-old lungs have "absorbed all the abuse of generations." She delivers a story of fresh abuse, from earlier that day, when her former Marine brother lost his temper and threw a tray of meatballs at the door. As the tale of family violence arcs

towards a finish, Lanzillotto does not hide her despondency. She details the logistics of her expensive treatments: the life-giving puffs of the nebulizer cost two thousand dollars each month, money that she does not have.

Annie Rachele Lanzillotto, the artist behind a series of discomfiting videos that blend solo performance with patient update, thus demonstrates the techniques and the spectacle of eviction survival. She is a Bronx-born poet who grew up popping wheelies on Saint Raymonds Avenue in the late Sixties. After her mother handed her father an order of protection, Lanzillotto unhappily relocated with her mother's family to a temporary apartment complex in Yonkers. There she studied and read for hours every night, an "educationa girl" in spite of the taunts of her relatives. At eighteen, Lanzillotto headed to Brown University as a softball recruit with a financial aid package, but a diagnosis of Hodgkin's Lymphoma halted her college career. In 1993, at thirty-one years old, Lanzillotto performed her first autobiographical solo show at Manhattan Class Company, Confessions of a Bronx Tomboy: My Throwing Arm, This Useless Expertise. After that first foray onto the stage, Lanzillotto crafted a series of solo shows and performance art pieces that explored the personal ethnographies of war (How to Wake up a Marine in a Foxhole), food and cultural heritage (a'Schapett, a site-specific work at the Arthur Avenue Retail Market in the Bronx), intercultural performance and gender identity (Sext Saudade), and religious histories (Catholic School Kindergarten Sweethearts Turned Queer). After years of small-scale productions buoyed by teaching gigs and commissions with health crises frequently interrupting her creative output-2013 marked Lanzillotto's most prolific year, with the publication of her poetry collection, Schistsong (Bordighera Press) and a memoir, Lis For Lion: An Italian Bronx Butch Freedom Memoir (SUNY Press, Lambda Literary Award finalist).

In anthropologist S. Lochlann Jain's recent book, Malignant: How Cancer Becomes Us, Jain, a cancer survivor, rails against the "survivor" rhetoric and the deployment of a term that can mean either the survival of a dehumanizing experience of terror or someone who outlives others. 4 It is this second, overlapping definition that resonates so powerfully with Lanzillotto's twist on the archetypal working resident forced out of the city due to shrinking affordances. Lanzillotto named her poetry collection Schistsong, after the metamorphic rock upon which Manhattan island is built. In its poems, she seeks new metonymy for life as a New Yorker: beset by anxiety at sunset, she breathes best in exhaust, downs vino in Tribeca on a candlelit loading dock, and takes her chemo to go. <sup>5</sup> An inescapable fact of her biography, illness becomes the relevant synecdoche for the city itself. Lanzillotto not only performs as someone who has undergone treatment, but also animates the calculus of the neoliberal city. Who can afford to stay, and who can afford to leave? That Lanzillotto remains is both remarkable and unremarkable and —like her status as a survivor—signifies something potentially arbitrary or disturbingly fated. More potently, Lanzillotto's work incorporates illness not as metaphor but as a transhistorical performative: an integral element of her experience and a connector to decades of precariously positioned working (and workless), waged (and unwaged) men and women. Lanzillotto's poetry and performances inject the unwaged labors of the artist into narratives defined by eviction and survival.



Lanzillotto (as the pushcart peddler "Chimaroot") and her grandmother Rosa Marsico Petruzzelli performing together in a'Schapett! (1996) at the Arthur Avenue Retail Market in the Bronx. Photo: Andrew Perret

How to define *precarity* in the context of one artist's work? The contested term refers most broadly to an economic condition particular to those without infrastructural support. Performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider writes, "The category appears as flexible and dislocatable as its members, variously containing refugees, asylum seekers, homeless persons, women, migrant workers, the underemployed, the long-term unemployed—and even, in general, youth." Lanzillotto's work communicates "eviction" as a kind of condition of the precariat, threading all of the above together, in threat or in everyday reality. To employ "eviction" in this sense is to see its multiplicity in the global city: the eviction of people from their home and the city, an eviction from the "innovation economy"—producing a labor that has value—and an eviction from the quotidian rhythms that establish the world of the living.

Many discussions of the "the neoliberal city" contend that workers in industries understood as "creative" increasingly experience precarity associated with post-Fordist employment and neoliberal governance. But, as Robert K. Schaeffer argues in a response to theorists of the pop sociology undergirding many formulations of precarity, "work has always been precarious for most of the working women, men, children, and elders around the world since the sixteenth century," with precarity "not a novel condition but a familiar one, particularly for women." Or, as Isabell Lorey explains, "precarity in capitalism is nothing new." Lanzillotto's work echoes a reality already established in these writings on the precarious condition and urban neoliberalism: it can describe innumerable ontological categories. For Lauren Berlant, precarity is a "perfect storm of old stories and new orientations," its reach extending to dimensions emotional, political, material, and spiritual. "[Precariousness is] a rallying cry for a thriving new world of interdependency and care that's not just private, but it is also an idiom for describing a loss of faith in a fantasy world to which generations have become accustomed." 10 This loss of faith, often underemphasized in scholarship on precarity, finds its expression in Lanzillotto's writing about past and present New York City. The city and its attendant nostalgia, its pop culture visions of generations of immigrants inhabiting, reproducing, and dying, are parodied in her confrontation with the hollow reality of once-middle-class neighborhoods. I analyze Lanzillotto's work within this framework of artist precarity and the performance of illness in neoliberal New York City and trace Lanzillotto's narratives of survival and

eviction that simultaneously confront Berlant's rallying cry for a new world and loss of faith in a fantasy of the old.

### Performing Eviction: Precarity and New York City

Annie Lanzillotto's performances construct a cityscape historically shaped and specifically located. In his writing on "austerity ideology" across three mayoralties in New York City, historian Julian Brash charts the economic transitions from a post-World War II metropolis governed by a coalition of finance, real estate interests, industry, and labor, through the budget crisis of 1975 that pushed labor and representatives of the poor from a position of power. 11 The 1980s "saw huge jumps in income inequality and poverty among the city's residents," and gains distributed in a highly unequal fashion. <sup>12</sup> The 1990s delivered the "revanchist" city of disintegrating liberal policy. While some critics branded Michael Bloomberg's three mayoral terms (2002-2013) as unequivocally plutocratic, the disproportionate influence of the financial sector was well established in New York by 1999, years before Bloomberg won office. 13 Still, he has been both celebrated and reviled as an apotheosis of neoliberal governance. To the latter camp, his technocratic approach only further normalized the reign of austerity and class politics: if his twelve-year reign constituted the final "act" of post-World War II economic restructuring, the 2000s was the decade which exhumed the waste. In November 2013, Bill DeBlasio, a progressive candidate for Mayor, won a surprising landslide victory that was quickly interpreted as a repudiation of former Mayor Bloomberg's policies: the business-as-usual approach to income inequality, unaffordable housing, and the feared transformation of New York into exclusively "a rich person's city." 14

For those of Lanzillotto's generation (b. 1963), the mid-1990s and its accompanying boom and bust were the exacerbation of larger trends rooted in post-World War II dynamics of personal and national histories. In Neil Smith and Jason Hackworth's periodization of gentrification, its "third-wave" began circa 1993, 15 right around the opening salvos of Lanzillotto's creative career. This post-recession gentrification differed in four prominent ways from previous formations: gentrification expanded beyond the inner core, large developers were increasingly the first to orchestrate reinvestment, effective resistance declined as the working class was displaced, and, most crucially for Smith and Hackworth, the state was now more involved in the process.  $\frac{16}{2}$  While some scholars emphasize the role of the downtown arts scene in second-wave gentrification of the Lower East Side, Lanzillotto falls outside many of the waves that installed artists in so-called blighted neighborhoods. Born at the wrong time to either capitalize on or benefit from artist migrations, she eventually falls victim to these shifts, and presents the ghostly afteraffects of New York City's economic restructuring in the 1990s and 2000s through the visage of a queer "i Bamboccioni"—the Italian word for "if you're in you're [sic] forties and you go back to living with ya mother." 17 Lanzillotto did, in fact, go back to living with her mother in her forties, when she was still writing and performing but could not find affordable, stable housing.

Scholars such as Ann Markusen have exposed gaps in the fabric of "creative economy" evangelism and the problematic realities behind the tech-centric "creative class." The work of performance theorists Schneider, Shannon Jackson, and Nicholas Ridout articulate the fictions of a neoliberal rhetoric that promotes "creativity" as the font of economic promise. Lanzillotto's work, then, should be situated alongside mounting critiques of the fashionable policies (and attendant jargon) that reflect the contradictions of the contemporary city: worshiping renewal through certain industries, neighborhoods plumped up with incentives for the real estate sector and specialized categories of "cultural producers," while long-time culture-makers protest their own evictions. City boosters design advertising campaigns to generate creative capital, but the

larger *polis* discerns an uneven urban recovery that neglects older professionals, those outside of the tech or finance sectors, and those in need of safety nets (veterans, the ill, homeless children).

Lanzillotto stands among an ever-widening cohort of artists who enact resistance to these dominant city trends, through coalitions, new work, and the promotion of their experiences within these developments. Musician David Byrne's 2013 article in the *Guardian* threatened self-deportation from New York City due to the characteristics of its new Gilded Age, in which the middle-class are excluded along with "emerging artists, musicians, actors, dancers, writers, journalists and small business people." Queer performers from Taylor Mac to Penny Arcade to Split Britches have all devised works that mourn a livable New York and protest a fortress culture that functions more expertly as a global business hub than it does as a space of potential for creative interaction and collaboration, for artistic survival and sustainability.

### Loss of Faith in the Fantasy: WheredaFFFhuck Did New York Go?

These expressions of dissatisfaction from notable artists create a particular anxiety, and lead also to fevered competitions for the most "livable" geographies—Berlin or L.A.? Detroit or Dubuque? And what of the artists who stay? One answer comes in the form of Lanzillotto's 2008 stage play, *The Flat Earth: WheredaFFFhuck Did New York Go?*, performed at Dixon Place, a small performance space then located on the Bowery. As the title suggests, Lanzillotto maps her search for New York and uses improvisatory techniques to gesture towards a drama not of the city, but with the city.

That Dixon Place itself was still fashioned as a living room—before its capital campaign and move into a new home on nearby Chrystie Street—made it an ideal location to play with the powerful confessional imperatives extant in any dialogue about gentrification. The encounters between artist-as-interloper and artist-as-resident, between artist-asdeveloper and artist-against-developer, touch the intimate domestic sphere. And so Lanzillotto's evening of confessional performance work was presented in the space that had been artistic director Ellie Covan's actual home, with the audience seated on couches ringing the ramshackle stage. (Dixon Place's graphic icon is still living room furniture, even if it now boasts regulation theatre seats.) The Flat Earth's monologues describe a series of exclusions: pushed from the piers by police officers, shoved from her home by landlords, from her healthy body by cancer, and from youth by menopause. The performance encompasses the parallel stories of displacement from her domestic and social homes, from her safe gueer spaces in the city, from the performance spaces of her early performing community. This triumvirate of survival needs and demands—housing, health, and intimacy—comprise the triple threats that contradict the performance's romance with community and the role of the artist within it. Her despair leads to a desire to see the wider landscape of the city's changes, a stubborn poet in a precarious home.

The second half of *The Flat Earth* abandons Dixon Place—evicting itself—for the street corner on the Lower East Side, a neighborhood rife with buildings destroyed, histories lost, and uses new. In a gestus of *we're all in this together, baby,* Lanzillotto well knows that audiences do not, as Baz Kershaw notes, come "ready-made" for alternative performance.<sup>23</sup> What she produces is a spontaneous un-community theatre that spotlights the raw testimony and intuitive storytelling of audience members and passersby.

In the first section of *The Flat Earth*, "The Blessing of the Rocks," Lanzillotto engages in a ritual pouring of water over Manhattan schist. She swings a stickball bat to ignite memories of childhood, infused with urban lore spanning the 1600s, 1800s, and 1900s. Lanzillotto bench-presses two traffic lights on a barbell until she reaches

exhaustion, and intones the "ghosts" of the notorious nineteenth century Bowery dive, Suicide McGurk's. "The Bowery's got the greatest ghosts in the world!" and Lanzillotto calls on them when she needs courage. In the face of a new Bowery that "looks like Minneapolis," Lanzillotto needs courage constantly, and the ghosts implore her to "Do something!" with the body she's got. <sup>24</sup> This activist imperative posed like a dare from the ghostly saloon owner McGurk and a related cast of Five Points waiters, gangsters, and bouncers transitions the *The Flat Earth* from the past to the present: her aging, female, queer body, decrying "New York City menopause," the end of her cycle, and the loss of five neighborhoods.

In the second Act, Lanzillotto directs the audience to follow her as she abandons the living room of Dixon Place, exits onto the Bowery, and migrates around the corner to a mailbox at the intersection of Prince and Elizabeth Streets. Sparklers in hand, she transforms into a rogue Lower East Side tour guide, pointing out the new condos she will never visit and the vestiges of old signs fading on the bricks of buildings. 25 Soon surrounded by \$250 boutique T-shirts for sale and walled in by high-rises, Lanzillotto's celebration is spiked with bitterness. There are no enemies, but the historical characters shaped in act one remain—the bar owners and ice men and stoop sitters and stickball heroes. Her sidewalk march to the mailbox tempers her nostalgia and sharpens her sense of mournful injustice. Lanzillotto's environmental theatre takes the landscape of the city as its scenery; the mailbox sessions are framed against the backdrop of twenty-story luxury towers. 26 The stage is to be the mailbox, that holy blue artifact from her childhood, both a relic and a platform for urban storytelling. The model here is not one of the tour guide—for a tour guide codifies city lines and neighborhood boundaries—but a kind of temporal carnival, in which the sins of the past do penance with the sins of the present. This march begins to feel like a protest: a performance calling attention to a series of exclusions and the matrices of a particularly urban loss.

Lanzillotto submits the performance to the street, to the passers-by, the interlocutors. The stickball bat prop becomes a talking stick passed between audience members and city walkers who climb atop the mailbox to share reflections about the Bowery under the streetlights. Lanzillotto describes one mailbox sharing session this way:

I improvised a lot, and I talked, maybe up to 60 minutes on different nights. And I talked about the history of the flophouses and vaudeville on the Bowery. And this clip is a guy who still lives on the Bowery. He's homeless, he's a veteran, ill, and he started out belligerent, because we had a lot of belligerent passers-bys, or drunks, or whatever. This guy took a whole 360—from starting out belligerent, he ended up saying, 'Ma'am, can I have the stick?' 27

First silent, disgruntled, then emboldened, belligerent, and quickly defensive, the man gives in to the lure of personal confession, and, perhaps, an audience. He immediately self-identifies as a homeless veteran. Onlookers can see the storytellers receive a tactile thrill from sitting on the mailbox, sharing in the immediacy of the street. The quality of the performance fulfills a disjointed model of community theatre, one that meets oral histories in their environment of imagining and creates spontaneous street performance. Their arrivals are not disruptions, but rehearsals of outrage.

The movement from Dixon Place onto the Bowery highlights the stark contrast between the performance space and the street; while one might not readily assume the intersection at Prince and Elizabeth to be a relatively "conservative context," 28 the performance reveals it to be just that. The performance rubs bare the political and economic processes that have normalized the space and produced its current attributes. Now on the street, the politics of spatial exclusion foreclose the rich and utopic imagining

of Act I. In Act II, Lanzillotto enacts rituals that cast gentrification as a kind of death—literally the disappearance of bodies. Maybe it is her accent, her constant intoning of buried relations, or maybe it is the serious and not so serious reminder that something—a tribe—is dying out. Which tribe is it? Her memoir includes an extensive glossary of terms for an unnamed language:

fungo: to pitch the ball to yourself

hoodycallit: someone whose name you forgot or don't want to mention or don't want to put in the effort to remember

hoodycall: hoodycallit<sup>29</sup>

Like this reminder of the tenuousness of lingo and language, her figure on the pavement reminds us of a similar loss. On the mailbox we visit North American cities like New York, Boston, and San Francisco, where Italian-Americans are among the groups that become another shortcut stand-in for the coming of new and the loss of the urban old—literally, the loss of the old and dying, and the loss of bodies in space. New bars in heavily Italian-American neighborhoods play on the notion of "social clubs" once popular in areas of Brooklyn and the Bronx; bodies swapped for others. While Lanzillotto is an optimistic narrator, lurking behind her nostalgic register is the insistent reminder that for her, art and survival both wage battles against disappearance.

### Catastrophic Illness and the Artist Ideal

Lanzillotto's sensitivity to disappearances is necessarily bound up with her status as a cancer "survivor." She reminds us that vulnerabilities are often felt and expressed in the aggregate; aches pool in the places where identities meet. As S. Lochlann Jain notes, the "nearly complete lack of socioeconomic support that presses those with catastrophic illness entirely out of the system" provides insights into other justifying logics of capitalism; "cancer itself parodies the capitalist ideal of accrual through time, and people with cancer inhabit its double consciousness." In Lanzillotto's case, the parody is also of the independent artist ideal, and of the streetwise, rough-hewn New Yorker capable of withstanding the shocks of the city.

The role for which Lanzillotto has received the most attention of late is that of "Grandma Angelina Nunzio" in Tony n' Tina's Wedding, an interactive theatre romp set at the wedding reception of an Italian-American couple from Queens. The play has been running Off-Broadway for over two decades and advertises itself as "the best party in New York," now with an outpost at Bally's casino in Las Vegas. 31 On May 25, 2014, the New York Times ran a story about Lanzillotto, which underscored her thirty-three years of dealing with cancer as informing her depiction of Grandma Nunzio. The journalist mentions Lanzillotto's acquaintance with suffering and scars, but the ebullience of the music, the play, and the dancing, win out: "She's not acting. She's living." Separated from the autobiographic frame Lanzillotto so frequently employs in her own work, the *Tony n'* Tina version of family—and New York—remains disconcertingly far from her usual balancing act of precarity and intimacy. The image accompanying the article encapsulates this disconnect: it could be from our own family album, and while we know this is a performance of family—the sentimental hue of the banquet hall—the fissures are easily forgotten. In the photograph, a cast member pushes Lanzillotto-as-Grandma in a wheelchair through a crowded block of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. She holds a cane aloft triumphantly, as if to dismiss any sense of fragility, yet the bustle of the city—the glare of the billboard across the street commanding, "LIVE AUTHENTICALLY"—confirms the urgency underneath a performance that is more about the trappings of identity and family than its viscera. That the context is a moment of mayhem in *Tony n' Tina's Wedding* suggests the

kind of unchanging New York demanded by such tourist attractions, and one that has moved from the theater to the street.



Annie Lanzillotto makes her way through Times Square as Grandma Angelina Nunzio, in Tony n' Tina's Wedding. Published May 25th, 2014 nytimes.com. Photo by David Gonzalez/The New York Times nytimes.com.

Lanzillotto's self-made YouTube video, "Live from the Nebulizer," provides a contrast, and an essential coda to the boisterous cane-shaking Grandma:

My lungs have absorbed all the abuse of generations.... As a little kid, they all smoked, which was just the beginning....my lungs took it all in...all the smoke, all the fighting, all my father's stories about Okinawa.... All the battles when he beat up my mother, I took it all into my lungs...they say 'childhood asthma'... this is childhood asthma, I'm 50 years old, and now I'm on a Nebulizer.... But these lungs have absorbed all the shit of all the generations of all the Italians and all the psychos, all the paranoid schizophrenia, and here I sit on a Nebulizer, drinkin' in the sweet air every four hours, the medicated, Nebulized air that costs \$2,000 dollars a month. And I don't have a way to pay for this air, either. Medicare said, this is a life-sustaining medicine so we're not paying for it unless you're in a nursing home. Well, I'm not in a nursing home. I told the hospital, you want me to leave here? Three conditions: you gimmie the medicine, you send me a bill, you understand I'm not paying that bill.

Okay, this is Survivor #00795424. Signing out for this morning, Friday the  $13^{th}$  of April, 2012, Yonkers, New York, waiting for the Home Visiting Nurse to come. 33

Tony n' Tina's Wedding offers the family-friendly version of Italian-

American bonhomie and gentle dysfunction, but on YouTube, Lanzillotto reports from a location most disturbing. In these before (Grandma) and after (Nebulizer) visions of New York City, we are greeted with a surprise: the devastating edge of Lanzillotto's work traces the gaps in available representations. The nebulizer-as-prop emphasizes the material realities of performance just as poignantly as it does the obstacles to the everyday. The viewer of the YouTube video must struggle to see through the claustrophobic framing, to look empathetically, to hear amid the noise of the unaffordable nebulizer, to evade the menacing brother who might return any moment. "Live from the Nebulizer" presents an argument for the reminders of precarity: the bureaucracies and boredoms, the injustices from without and from within.

Within her own body, her own family, her own home, her own community of survivors, alive and dead, Lanzillotto is not a flâneur, nor is she a helicopter news team hovering above. Perhaps the best metaphor for these performances—both Grandma and *The Flat Earth*—is found in the glossary she provides with her memoirs. There is hopefulness in the act of creating a glossary, and it speaks to her commitment to New York and her belief in the discursive act of writing. Theorist José Esteban Muñoz described the negative sentiments that supposedly characterize the post-Fordist moment, noting, "these bad sentiments can signal the capacity to transcend hopelessness," and produce an educated hope, "a certain practice of hope that helps escape from a script in which human existence is reduced." Lanzillotto follows a similar practice, with aspirations of health, desire, creativity, rest, and habitation.

Lanzillotto's memoir, *L is for Lion*, documents the upheavals endemic to an adulthood shaped by illness. Her exposure to life-threatening illness came early in her life, when, in 1981 as a freshman at Brown University, she was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma. (Her second bout with cancer came in 1997.) As a consequence, her work frequently makes plain the linkages between urban space, health, and economics. Sociologist Rose Galvin has demonstrated the trend in many western nations to deploy health as virtue, and chronic illness is understood in the terms of a moral failure that signifies a lack of self-reliance and responsibility. Galvin bridges the conceptual linkage between the particular stigma of the chronically ill and the neoliberal frame of self-sufficiency as an exalted (healthy) condition: The healthy person is, in effect, symbolic of the ideal neoliberal citizen, autonomous, active and responsible and the person who deviates from this ideal state is, at best, lacking in value and, at worst, morally culpable. As a queer artist, Lanzillotto is multiply culpable; not only is she bruised by the stigmas attached to lower-income queers, the state is also well aware that certain cosmopolitan visions of New York and its art scenes leave little room for a deviation of this "ideal state."

Lanzillotto's work also squarely refutes the language of increased burden, a hallmark of the monetization of the value of care and the imperatives of austerity. Jill H. Casid has called for a reconsideration of "care in terms of the demanding exercise of public feelings," which begins with the many problems of care under conditions of economic precarity: the outsourcing of care and whether care is supported, how it is enacted and on whose terms. Because a platform for such questions: she honors the role of care-taking and care-giving, and yet reveals the inviolate state of careneeding. This includes her unavoidable reliance on the limited structures of the city, as individual responsibility confronts social responsibility. When the needs of the artist transcend the material realities of her art, Lanzillotto demands a reckoning with matters of interdependence.

Through her blogs (Lanzillotto's *Cancer Decameron* and i-Italy) and self-produced videos, she reconceives the spaces of her activism and art *in media res*, and gestures most conspicuously to the nagging question of shared responsibility. Lanzillotto's narrative of illness is shaped by her ability to stubbornly confront these themes of eviction with her hope in interdependence—care for her city enough to stay, care from the city that has kept her alive thus far. The hospitals of the city have what she needs—literally, oxygen and blood—but that the price is steep: the metered time of 25 cents for ten minutes, the demand that every soul discover its ruthless and relentless "inner Trump." The city does not intend to embrace everyone, and the message on the Statue of Liberty is copiously footnoted and harshly edited. There is not room for *all* the "degenerate artists homosexuals crooked teeth painters gifted fags and all their ancestors," and so what of those with serious illness? Lanzillotto's outer-borough artistry protests the ramifications of this ethos through the *vida quotidiana* of a two-time cancer survivor. In all

of Lanzillotto's work, she maintains her defensive posture towards the despair brought about by too many hours spent in hospital rooms ("Over the past twenty-nine years, I average sixty visits a year./ The great thing is they turn me inside out"41), and her hastily made, improvisatory video rants jab the viewer with the reality that Lanzillotto is living a life of particular discomforts. The poetry she writes proclaims miracles, and the archives of her illness are collected under both duress and divine inspiration.

### **Schistsong:** Eviction Poems

Word by word and line by line, Lanzillotto's book of collected poems, Schistsong, can be read as a poetic counter to a downtown arts culture complicit with these erasures. (During her installation works in the late 1990s, Lanzillotto argued for rebellion against "the value system of the downtown artist communities."  $\frac{42}{1}$  Lanzillotto's relationship with New York sits at the fulcrum of her own negotiations with the manicured mainstream. This is most deeply felt when she travels to the urban spaces that once protected her: from independent performance spaces to dance clubs to the lost piers of Christopher Street to the simplicity of the sunsets on a newly gentrified street. In the poem "Spirit Track," a melancholy sea shanty to be intoned on the West Side Highway, Lanzillotto returns again and again to mourn the loss of the piers and a time "when the edges of the city marked the start of our journeys." 43 Yet Lanzillotto punctuates her nostalgia with the violence and brutality she experienced: "Spirit Track" is shadowed by bigoted police and troubled by surveillance and harassment. In his anthropological work on the Christopher Street piers, Martin Manalansan explains, "Far from being a utopic space, the piers nevertheless signify the days when queers felt they owned the sites."44 Today, where there were once warehouses, there are now condominium developments, and a new kind of hostility grows among the greenery: the city has become too expensive for those who once sought refuge there, even if real estate companies advertise their Hudson Pier luxury condos in *Gay City*. 45

In writing of this metamorphosis of the cityscape between hospital stays, Lanzillotto calls out the shell game performed in front of her: the superficial acceptance of this Bronx butch, the price tag hidden behind cultural freedom and annual parades. Lanzillotto stands alongside the many scholars, activists, and artists alike who have critiqued the agenda of mainstream queer politics in the United States, which, they argue, seeks "to join rather than critique and contest" inequalities and injustices. 46 Performance scholars have identified a corollary imbalance in New York's "mainstream" queer performance culture, driven by repetitive representations that exalt "self-congratulatory queer identification—the politics of lifestyle." The ascent of urban chic musicals such as Rent helped establish the category of what David Savran dubs "hipbrow," the folding of queer aesthetics into consumerism, typified by a "standardized, easily recognizable formula and a mystique of authenticity (or realness)."48 It is little wonder that Lanzillotto's pointed resistance against the glorification of sexy urban detritus as stage set and her airing of (very unhip) afflictions do not rate high on the rotation for literary managers at theatres. This is the rhetorical situation within which Lanzillotto generates her work: confrontations with the "entrepreneurial city" of the late twentieth century, distinguishable from its historical precedents in part due to this capitalization of "queers as commodities" and the myth of gay affluence.  $\frac{49}{100}$ 

Her poems mourn the Saturday nights in the late 1980s when Lanzillotto would escape the "homophobic crap" of the week and revel on the dance floor at the Paradise Garage. 50 She worships the memories of these alternative social and performance spaces, not just as sites of fantasia apart from her family, but also as vicarious experiences of health. She is in attendance the night Paradise Garage closed—September 26, 1987—which also marked her "cure" from cancer: "five years of remission equals a cure." The next day, her brother,

CarKey, takes her for a ride in his Lincoln Continental and tells her that he knows *what she is*, and forbids her to go near his children. Lanzillotto despairs. "The Paradise Garage was closed. Where the hell was I going to go?" 52 Yet the glitter of Manhattan's rock runs deep, from Lanzillotto's jawbone to the marrow of her compositions. "Me and the city/ Drilled to the root." 53 The reader knows Lanzillotto will not go far, which, in Lanzillotto's world, functions as both a privilege and the markings of survivorship.

CarKey and the other male figures in her family create a pathological bricolage of troubled veterans and wounded patriarchs who ghost her poems and stories. Yet throughout all of Lanzillotto's work, her relationship with the city (and its five boroughs) outranks hospital roommates, siblings, and first loves. She rages against the dispassionate flâneur; her urban philosophy is best expressed through the sidewalk cracks and the crevices into which the saints escape. Her allegiance to the bedrock of the city extends to its "quartz and feldspar and mica and hornblende." 54 This creates a contradictory twin narrative of rootedness and loss, for Lanzillotto is homeless—by some definitions. Exiting through the doors of Sloan-Kettering after a cancer treatment, Lanzillotto realizes that "the revolution hadn't happened in [her] sleep, gentrification did," and one poem demarcates her official characterization as 'Homeless Sleeping with Relative' on bureaucratic paperwork.  $\frac{55}{5}$  She has many symbolic, tertiary, and potentially spectral homes, including her ancestral homeland of Italy, artistic communities and collaborators, and, more to the point, a mother in Yonkers, with whom she lives after she is evicted. "Aborted by landlords," Lanzillotto is just one more Nooyawkah who, she explains in the somber poem "Spirit Track," "knows you don't know New York 'til you live in her street/ When New York is nine million/ doors and you have not one key." 56

She responds to perceived municipal betrayals by seizing the performativity of language: her poem, "I Never York City, Vows," enacts a marriage pact with the city. What better way to end her itinerancy than through a bond with a wealthy partner? There is no officiant—no Mayor Bloomberg, no Mayor Giuliani—just the city, its residents, its memories, and its landscape. She offers a playful—yet stinging—proposal. She vows togetherness through her old lady years, "black cane stuck in a sidewalk groove," street direction set by the course of two rivers, her evening hours spent in "a night class in Religious Studies at NYU." 57

But there is a problem. New York City chooses eviction over matrimony. New York City seeks "the rich, the healthy, the lucky/the white polite who want to come pursue a dream up my asshole/ who will give me all." Her "queer butch ass" belongs in Yonkers, on her mother's floor, outside the city limits. The city performs a seduction, yes, but there exists equal parts thievery, its gifts at once everything and nothing: "sunsets at the waters' edge, cultural freedom, a parade once a year." 59 For Lanzillotto, New York is a city ghosted by precarity: birthed by the fissures of immigration, histories lived in sweatshops and linoleum kitchens shared by too many cousins and neighbors, the violence of neighborhoods buried deep within the cement, the comforts and hazards of a particular brand of closeness and intimacy. Lanzillotto, then, commits to a metaphor—or is it the delusional optimism of the swindled bride? New York City is her true love, but she needs the proverbial Sugar Daddy. She chooses the one who kicked her out "for a rich girl who could afford the lease/ the four fifty coffee/ twenty dollar pie/ 50 buck parking spot/ bottled water/bottled dollars/twelve dollar lily." Once evicted, Lanzillotto inverts the vow: she vows not to another, but to herself, and to the redemptive acts that might sustain her. Not to a home, but hopefully, the basics: she commits to listen to corner love stories, to write, to speak, to make performance—"to give a fffhuck." 1 There is, of course, nothing basic about this: as José Esteban Muñoz wrote in his article about artist Mark Morrisroe, "enduring is nothing like a minimalist practice." 62 Lanzillotto's writing is the revenge of the

jilted lover/resident/survivor—she is unforgiving in her accounting of the painful protocols of eviction.

Certainly, there are parallels between the rejection of Lanzillotto's desires, her exclusion from the city, and the burdens of cancer survivorship. Her desperation for marriage itself appears absurd—naïve, even—as we are reminded of her medical needs and her homelessness, both serious and sustained. Uninterested in her attempts to barter her service as an artist to the community in return for a home, the city instead insists upon its principles of late-capitalist exchange. Faced with the potential re-enactment of the transatlantic movement of her immigrant grandmother, the narrative of the past is threatened with a reversal of supposed generational progress. Her object of desire brutally tells her, "Not even your corpse has a place/ within the walls of this city." 63

Talk of corpses is prevalent in theories crystallizing the precarity of our hyper-capitalist moment, particularly as expressed in global cities—and, more specifically, a brand of neoliberal governance in New York City that has pursued a vision of the city as a corporation and luxury product. 64 If the coupling of neoliberal politics with queer cultural discourses births a pure vision of globalized gay (often male) consumerism, 65 one underbelly of this phenomenon is the queer precariat as a byproduct of uneven development.

#### **Poverty and Precarity**

Lanzillotto is among the invisible poor whose "outing" produces a mode of seeing that reveals a life on the edge of disappearance. 66 Her writings about gentrification, for example, do not hinge on a nostalgic cry for visibility and resurrection—mom and pop stores!—but a fight against corporeal vanishing, including her own. As a consequence, all of Lanzillotto's restless investigations—one-woman shows, site-specific installations, a print memoir and an album of music recorded with her eponymous band—evidence her ability to both thrive from and bristle at her inabilities: to escape her home and its many pasts, her body and its afflictions.

When set in the context of Lanzillotto's previous performance work and writing, her recent video ephemera function as poetically urgent distillations of her theatrical explorations into the nature of the city's working class histories, when she intoned pushcart peddlers and block ice deliverers. The video logs express the place-specific conflicts and consistencies across four decades of afflictions in the neoliberal city. The unedited video clips serve as letters from the front lines of low-income patient rights, and showcase the tactics of a queer artist/survivor foundering in her home city. Paired with an occasionally winking title—"LIVE From Sloan-Kettering!"—these intimate documents tunnel through the veneers of policy debates to expose the limits of support systems and the raw moments of daily resistance required to survive chronic illness. In one, filmed in a hallway at Sloan-Kettering Memorial Hospital, she performs the labor of breathing by walking one lap around the fifteenth floor, a task that consumes nearly two minutes of full effort. She is conspicuously alone in these moments, a patient of a post-apocalyptic ward in which the quarantined, left without attendants, turn instead to the affective power of the Internet. The Annie Lanzillotto appearing live! at Sloan-Kettering may just be her most thoroughly New York character yet. It is certainly the character most indelible to the city that once never slept, but now never retreats: a cosmopolitan city, a global city, a consumerist city, an occupied city, a neoliberal city, a gentrified city, and home.

This character borrows from and trades in the theatricality of her various faiths: Catholicism, creativity, and the affective and ethical demands of New York City. "Could this miracle happen daily in my neighborhood/ and I not know?" she writes in "Spirit Track." 17 In Tony n Tina's Wedding, Lanzillotto deliberately heightens her performance of

Grandma Nunzio, but its power, the *Times* suggests, is in its authenticity. Likewise, we cannot ever be sure where the performance begins or ends in Lanzillotto's YouTube videos; we know she resides in her mother's house, undergoes the traumas she describes, and we believe that this will continue when the camera is turned off. But this is also how Lanzillotto poses questions of faith within the discomforts of her work: she creates fictional representations not just for survival, but also for political ends, to believe that there are solutions—and salvation—within the experience of precarity.

On an individual level, the jump from precarity to spirituality is not uncommon; it is worth keeping in mind that the very term "precarity" now in use within academic discourses has its root in the religious thought. Lanzillotto, raised with the specters and symbols of Italian-American Roman Catholicism, communicates spirituality through what I describe as the "holy visceral." She lifts the city "above the streetlights," longing for a miracle prescribed by the unknown saints whose names adorned her Bronx streets. Catholic imagery is incorporated alongside Lanzillotto's visceral responses to the changes of her city—Manhattan's destiny, she insists, is glitter. Her North may be suffering, but her South is Acquaviva, and the aching for her rural ancestors never leaves Lanzillotto (whose maternal grandmother never understood her focus on education and her ignorance of the "basics"). As the reader thumbs through photographs accompanying her memoir, Lanzillotto's religious upbringing is foregrounded to a surprising degree: Lanzillotto with Sister Rosaria and Father Caldarola at Santa Maria School, 1969; her mother's Bronx Baptism certificate from Church of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, 1927; Lanzillotto with her oratorical coach, Sister Raymond Aloysius at the Yonkers Memorial Day Parade, 1977; Lanzillotto and a friend at a March on Washington holding their banner, "Catholic School Kindergarten Sweethearts Turned Queer," 1983. The message is deceptive; while on the one hand the visuals provide another paean to the cultural signposts of her Bronx childhood, I would argue for an alternate reading, an ecumenical slant on precarity that is not as often revealed.

In the May 1952 issue of *The Catholic Worker*, the radical pacifist nun, Dorothy Day, published an article, "Poverty and Precarity." Day observed that it was hard to write about poverty when faced with her community: immigrant families living in basement rooms and working in sweatshops all day, with furniture piling in her backyard from nearby tenement evictions. Still, precarity is mysterious and complex, and without it, Day contended, one could not help the poor. Without precarity, everyone who boasted of escaping "the poverty class" would not see how far (or how close) they were to it. 68 All those who assumed that poverty could be solved with "good habits," or had a conception of poverty as "neat and well ordered as a nun's cell" knew nothing about the poor. Day concluded that poverty needed to be talked about if these misconceptions were to be redressed (but also that corporate wealth should no longer hide individual poverty). With this emphasis on vulnerability, Day maintained that voluntary poverty "is the grace we most need in this age of crisis, at this time when expenditures reach into the billions to defend 'our American way of life:" Lanzillotto voices this brand of precarity implicitly; she fears, broadcasts, and catalogues the mysteries and complexities of the condition.

"The connection between performance and religion is ancient," writes Janelle Reinelt, "but often under-appreciated in a contemporary context." Lanzillotto's performances insist on a relationship between poverty, precarity, and ritual that is buried in the quotidian. It is inextricably connected to the moment-to-moment work of living with illness, of producing in grassroots performance traditions, of acknowledging and protesting her personal histories. She bears the material instabilities echoed in the lives of dead relatives and lost characters—the silent Mr. Cinquand, Amelia the shut in, forgetful Beppe, prayerful Uncle Gus, mad Aunt Apollonia, Grandma Rose, and Joe Zito and Gaspare, the elevator men at

the Triangle Factory. She bucks traditions and yet ritualizes the struggles of her descendants; she loves the city even as she painstakingly peels away layers of strife borne from decades of absorbing its blows. Evicted, she longs for home even while agitating for escape from the theater space or the page.

For many, precarity is synonymous with anxiety, not empathy or spirituality. Its dominant media representations take the form of *New York Times* neediest cases and extended Jacob Riis-styled photojournalist exposés—the rising ranks of homeless children, almost half of New Yorkers living near or below the poverty line, the widespread disappearance of jobs that pay a living wage. Yet even for artists and art scholars, the term's complexity is easily confused or diminished; does precarity feed the artist while poverty depletes it? Does Lanzillotto's output attest to Day's insistence on the grace found in precarity, but reject its physical, material, and emotional ravages? By harvesting points of connection between her identities, Lanzillotto operates within the Holy Visceral, a peculiar mode: without material resources, her devotion remains—Muñoz's "educated hope" by another name. Her poems, performances, and multimedia works are most profound when understood within this genre of self-styled blessings. Generating her own answers to the "loss of faith" symptomatic of her conditions, she sanctifies the inevitability of precarity in order to protest the inequities of eviction.

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**Notes** 

## **Notes**

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- 24. Lanzillotto, "Flat Earth," 3. 🔁
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